

The daily grind

If you like fresh bread, you'll love fresh flour

by Jane Fowler

For thousands of years, humans have been doing the “daily grind” to make bread. Often referred to as the staff of life, bread is considered a good source of complex carbohydrates as well as dietary fiber, and it provides us with nutrients such as magnesium, iron, selenium, and B vitamins. But the quality of bread, in terms of both taste and nutrition, is wholly dependent on using good quality ingredients. And since bread is essentially nothing more than flour and water – with a sprinkling of salt and leavening agent – it is vital to use the best and freshest flour possible.

I've been baking bread almost daily for the last 20 years. I know exactly what is in it, and I feel happy in the knowledge that my family is eating bread free of preservatives and other additives. With bread being such an important part of our diet, I spent some time researching and considering the merits of different flours.

I learned that whole wheat flour has a relatively short shelf life. How can it be that a wheat kernel, stored under ideal circumstances, can last almost indefinitely, complete with all its nutrients, yet that same kernel milled into flour

will go rancid if left sitting on a pantry shelf?

A wheat kernel comprises three parts. The bran, which is removed for white flour, is the outer covering that contains vitamins, minerals, and fiber. The endosperm, which is ground to make flour, is the largest, starchy part of the kernel; it contains carbohydrates, protein, vitamins, and minerals. Finally, there is the germ, the tiniest part of the kernel, containing vitamins, protein, minerals, and essential fatty acids. The germ (short for germination) is actually the embryo of the wheat plant, and it is the most nutrient-rich part of the kernel. Containing oils, it can quickly turn rancid, so it is removed in the process of making white flour, to extend shelf life.

THE RIGHT MILL

I wanted to use nutritious flour, with nothing removed, and I wanted the convenience and cost savings of buying flour in bulk, but without having to worry about its shelf life. The obvious next step was to invest in a grain mill. When you mill your own, what you get is a full-flavored, unrefined flour. I have been doing the daily grind for the last four years. It may sound daunting, but if you choose



The author has experimented with a number of different grains: (clockwise from top) wheat, rye, amaranth, Blue flint corn, and barley. (Jane Fowler photos)

the right mill it's really not such a big deal.

When choosing a mill, there are a few questions to ask yourself. Most importantly, how often and how much will you use it? If you're someone who likes to bake the occasional artisan-style loaf for breakfast on the weekend, then a manual grain mill may be what you're looking for. On the other hand, if you're likely to bake a batch of loaves in one session, then you'll probably want the ease of an electrical mill. You should check how much grain the mill can hold, and how long it will take to grind the flour.

Bear in mind that electrical mills are far noisier than manual. Some are very loud, so you need to check the specifications. (Mine is kept with my grains in a walk-in pantry, so noise was not a concern for me.) You should also know that milling grain can be a messy business, quickly coating nearby surfaces with a dusting of flour. Manual models create less dust, and some electrical models have a collection chamber that prevents a dusty kitchen.

Another consideration is whether you want to be able to vary the coarseness of the grind. Coarse flour makes wonderful bread, while fine flour is best for cakes and pastries, so most people look for a model that offers a choice. You should also think about what you want to

The NutriMill Classic, the impact type of grain mill with fast-spinning steel blades, allows the user to adjust the grind, from coarse to very fine. It is capable of milling 20 cups in five minutes.



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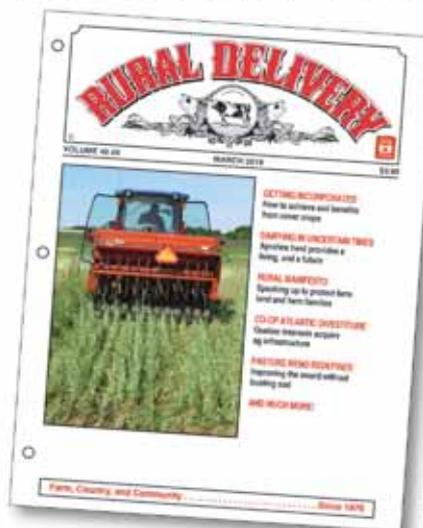


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grind. Most mills can only handle dry grains, corn, and beans, but some models can also grind nuts and seeds to make nut butters.

BURR OR IMPACT

From a technical perspective, there are two main types of grain mills designed for home use. Burr mills consist of two grinding disks, made of steel or stone, that can be adjusted to produce cracked grains, corn meal, or fine flour. If your family loves corn bread, then you may want to consider a burr mill. Stone disks are the most durable, and produce the finest flour, but they also need to be cleaned frequently. A burr mill can be either manual or electric.

The other type is an impact mill, which doesn't really grind, but tosses the grain against rows of fast-spinning blades, creating a pulverizing effect. These mills are usually compact, self-cleaning, fast, and easy to use. They produce fine flour but do not crack grains or produce a true corn meal. Impact mills are always electric, and because of the speed of the blades they tend to be the noisiest type.

The machine I use is a NutriMill Classic, and I estimate that in four years I have ground approximately 800 kilograms of grain. (That's a lot of bread – but if you have raised active teenage sons with healthy appetites, you know how much they can devour in one sitting!) Being the impact type, it is quick and simple to use. I just pop the kernels in the top

and leave it to grind while I start the yeast.

The machine gives me the option of producing flour ranging from coarse to very fine, and it is capable of milling 20 cups in five minutes. It also has a collection chamber to eliminate the dust. I get flour containing all the nutrients of the whole grain, and the taste is far superior because it is truly fresh.

Over the years I have experimented with different grains, including wheat, spelt, kamut, rye, and oats. I have also milled gluten-free grains such as amaranth, quinoa, and flint corn from the garden. Just remember not to use oily seeds or nuts, unless suitable for your mill.

I use mostly wheat for baking bread, as it has the most gluten, which gives a soft, well-risen loaf. For a stronger tasting bread, great with cheese and pickles, rye can be used, although it will give a heavier, denser loaf. (For a lighter loaf with some of that robust flavor, try substituting 25-30 percent rye in a wheat bread recipe.)

If you are planning to mill flour regularly, it is worthwhile purchasing your grains in bulk. You can usually find them in any good health food store, or you may consider joining a food buying group and purchasing directly from the mill. I buy grains in 25-kilogram sacks, which makes daily baking convenient and economical. I now consider a grain mill an essential kitchen appliance, and one I would recommend to anyone who enjoys homemade bread. ●

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